

GAMES

FAQ

Q I want to play the latest games, such as Crysis, but I can't afford to spend hundreds of pounds on a new graphics card. Are there any other options?

A Once every few years a game like Crysis comes along and redefines the graphical standard for PC games. To get it running smoothly at the highest possible detail settings you'll need two Nvidia GeForce 8800GTX graphics cards in SLI configuration, which will set you back a hefty £600.

Our advice in these situations is to be patient. Prices of such cards will drop as newer, faster, cards come on to the market. Alternatively, you could play the game at lower detail settings, although even then you'll need an 8800GT costing around £180. A third, far cheaper option is to play the game at a gaming centre.

Omega Sektor in Birmingham is the UK's largest dedicated gaming centre with more than 400 PCs and consoles to play on. Three hours of play costs £5, which is much cheaper than a new graphics card in the short term. If you live further south, check out the new Gamerbase gaming centre at HMV in Piccadilly Circus, with prices up to £4 an hour. For more details see www.omega-sektor.com and www.gamerbase.com.

Seth Barton

Video and games expert

seth@computershipper.co.uk



ZALMAN ZM-M220W

★★★★

£430 inc VAT

From www.quietpc.com

Most modern PC games are set in 3D worlds, but they have to be translated into 2D images for display on your PC monitor. Zalman's new monitor improves on this by tricking your brain into perceiving the 3D information inherent in your games.

The monitor works with 5000-, 6000- and 7000-series Nvidia graphics cards and uses a tweaked driver to create the 3D effect. This encodes 3D information into the image by rendering the world from two points of view, which is how we perceive 3D in the real world.

Glasses and clip-on lenses are provided with the monitor. The left and right lenses are polarised at offset angles, while a pair of filters on the front of the monitor match up with them. Without the glasses the picture looks blurred, but put them on and each eye perceives a subtly different image. Your brain then combines the two images and everything pops into startlingly effective 3D. Specially created 3D video clips had an impressive sense of depth. In a particularly impressive underwater scene, a fish seemed to swim out of the screen towards us.

The current driver works only in XP, although a Vista driver with 8000-series support is expected soon. The technology is a result of collaboration between Zalman and Nvidia, so don't expect to see any ATI drivers. It also works with only a limited number of games, but support will increase with future drivers. See the current list at <http://tinyurl.com/2rxdle>.

We played Painkiller on the test system provided. There were some bugs – for example, some of the weapon graphics were blurred. In general, though, it was very impressive and produced a



very real sense of depth. Structures such as pillars, beams and any large objects standing alone in an empty space were particularly effective. The effect is so striking that we died repeatedly while marvelling at the enemy leaping towards us. Even little touches, such as the way the HUD sits in front of and apart from the rest of the action, look and feel right.

With the glasses off and the monitor in standard 2D mode you'd never notice there was anything unusual about it. It's a 22in widescreen display with a native resolution of 1,680x1,050. It's ideal for playing the latest games, whether in 3D or not. Response time was quick, contrast looked good and the polarising layers didn't seem to add any unwanted graininess.

Driver support is limited, and if your favourite games are listed, you can count yourself lucky. It's not cheap either, costing around £200 more than an equivalent standard monitor. It works impressively well, though, and when it works with more games, we'll be tempted to get rid of our boring old 2D monitors for good.

Seth Barton

SUMMARY

- ✓ Startling 3D effect
- ✓ Decent as a 2D monitor
- ✗ Needs better driver support

22IN WIDESCREEN LCD 1,680x1,050 native resolution, 1,000:1 contrast ratio, 5ms (black-to-black) response time, VGA, DVI
PART CODE ZM-M220W
DETAILS www.zalman.co.kr

Top 5 games

1. The Orange Box

£18 inc VAT ★★★★★



This great-value omnibus contains the excellent Half-Life 2 plus Episodes 1 and 2. There's also a mind-bending puzzle game, Portal, and the stylish Team Fortress 2.

SUPPLIER www.game.co.uk DETAILS www.valvesoftware.com FULL REVIEW Feb 2008



2. Call of Duty 4: Modern Warfare

£30 inc VAT ★★★★★



This first-person shooter's short campaign mode is intense and action packed, while the multiplayer mode grabs your attention with unlockable weapons and skills.

SUPPLIER www.play.com DETAILS www.charlieoscardelta.com FULL REVIEW Feb 2008



3. Crysis

£27 inc VAT ★★★★★



Crysis gives you plenty of choice in how to approach your enemy and how to defeat them. However its stunning graphics will leave all but the most powerful PCs struggling.

SUPPLIER www.amazon.co.uk DETAILS www.ea.com/crysis FULL REVIEW Feb 2008



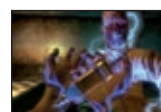
4. BioShock

£25 inc VAT ★★★★★



BioShock successfully blends first-person shooting with RPG-style character upgrades. It's set in an undersea city that's both terrible and beautiful to behold.

SUPPLIER www.play.com DETAILS www.cultofrapture.com FULL REVIEW Dec 2007



5. Lord of the Rings: Shadows of Angmar

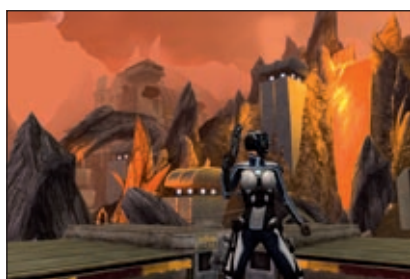
£13 + £9 a month inc VAT ★★★★★



This online role-playing game lets you immerse yourself in Tolkien's Middle Earth. The game's detail is truly stunning, it's easy to get into and the combat is excellent.

SUPPLIER www.amazon.co.uk DETAILS www.lotro.com FULL REVIEW Sep 2007





▲ You may often find yourself alone in this well-crafted multiplayer game

NCSOFT Tabula Rasa

★★★★★

£18 inc VAT, plus \$15 per month
From www.amazon.co.uk

Putting a fresh spin on massively multiplayer online (MMO) gaming is quite a challenge, but its probably the only sensible option considering World of Warcraft's dominance. Tabula Rasa differentiates itself by moving the action to a science-fiction setting and adding shooter mechanics to the usual RPG template.

As with other NCSOFT games, creating a character consists of picking a face and an outfit. However, as you play through the tutorial, your character gradually specialises, and eventually you must choose a class. At this point you can clone your character, creating a replica in one of your other character slots on that server. As you can specialise several times throughout the game, these back-up characters mean you never make a choice that you can't change later. Also, you never have to replay missions you've already completed when trying out other character classes.

Gameplay consists of running over a set of cleverly designed battlefields while taking on aliens and wildlife in mostly long-range combat. Players can also adopt any psychic powers they discover while exploring the battlefields, which adds variety to the combat alongside the well-designed weapon and ammo systems. Combat is satisfying, and as you progress through the levels and get access to meatier powers and weapons, the body-count increases substantially.

While the whole point of MMO games is usually to team up with other players, it feels more like an option in Tabula Rasa, which can make for a lonely experience. It's fine as a solo role-playing game, and players can even choose different outcomes to missions, which are embedded in a decent plot with good voice acting. This brings something new to the MMO genre without stepping too far into unfamiliar territory. If you're tired of the usual elves and goblins, Tabula Rasa makes for an interesting and highly polished alternative.

Dan Griliopoulos

SUMMARY

- ✓ Science fiction setting
- ✓ Can experiment with your character
- ✗ Little need for teamwork

ONLINE ROLE-PLAYING GAME Requires Windows XP/Vista, 2.5GHz processor, 512MB RAM, 128MB graphics card, 5GB disk space
PRODUCT CODE B0009WXQJG
DETAILS www.rgtr.com



▲ The Seraphim race doesn't get a campaign, but you can control it in multiplayer mode

THQ Supreme Commander: Forged Alliance

★★★★★

£18 inc VAT
From www.play.com

Strategy isn't strategy for some folks unless they're directing huge, faceless robotic armies. In this second Supreme Commander game, there's still no caring about individual units. Hundreds march to war at once, and it's only when your force's death toll starts to number in the dozens that you'll even frown.

Other RTS games may let you invest more in an individual soldier, but they lack the breathtaking scale and intensity of Supreme Commander. This standalone expansion pack enlarges the game further by throwing in a new playable faction, the alien Seraphim. In the interest of balance and fair play, they're not a major departure from the drones, tanks, planes and subs of the existing races, but they're the best-looking of the bunch.

A new user interface has made this infamously complex game a little easier to play. The controls are more obvious, and it avoids the first game's mistake of obscuring a quarter of the screen with icons. It's a more unrelenting experience than before, however. If you haven't spent much time with other real-time strategy games, it will be bewildering, and even if you have, the single-player game can be a struggle. Each of its six levels stretches to a good three exhausting hours, the map cruelly expanding whenever you think you've finally vanquished your foe. It's a challenge that Supreme Commander veterans will relish, but new players will find it daunting at first.

Still, you can play skirmish missions against AI opponents, or online, where the odds are fairer. It may be too hard for some, but Forged Alliance is a welcome second chance to enjoy the spectacle of Supreme Commander. It's more polished and varied than the first game, so start here if you're new to the series.

Alec Meer

SUMMARY

- ✓ Huge and genuinely strategic
- ✓ An improvement over the first game
- ✗ Steep learning curve

REAL-TIME STRATEGY Requires Windows XP/Vista, 1.8GHz processor, 512MB RAM, 128MB graphics card, 8GB disk space
PRODUCT CODE B000VT5BPO
DETAILS www.supremecommander.com



▲ ProStreet isn't nearly as exciting as it looks. Damage modelling is the only highlight

ELECTRONIC ARTS Need for Speed: ProStreet

★★

£25 inc VAT
From www.amazon.co.uk

Some episodes in Need for Speed's history have been outstanding. Need for Speed: Most Wanted, for example, had thrillingly fast cars and a whole city's worth of streets to cover with burnt rubber. Sadly, many games bearing the title have been less than stellar, and ProStreet is one of these.

In an attempt to shake up the franchise, ProStreet has done away with the seedy background of illegal street racing. Instead, the action has been transported to a variety of characterless racecourses, and the arcade thrills have been supplanted by a touch of realism. That's not to say that much of the typical Need for Speed swagger isn't in evidence – the soundtrack is still punctuated by instantly forgettable teen-angst rock and rowdy hip hop. The ever present, and deeply aggravating, commentator patronisingly insists on repeating just how 'rad' your character is at driving, which grates after mere minutes.

Recent Need for Speed games have paid little heed to realism, but while the vehicles have handled more like jet-powered shopping trolleys than cars, ProStreet's vehicles are more challenging to drive. However, the result sits uneasily between arcade and simulation, and we doubt it'll please devotees of either school. With the extra realism comes cars that get damaged when you crash – so there's no more driving into a corner at 130mph and merrily bouncing off the crash barriers.

ProStreet's problem is that it's just too serious. There's little motivating you to even bother completing the seemingly endless series of inanely easy races. The drag racing is boring, the circuit racing tedious and the presentation is embarrassing compared with the likes of Colin McRae: DiRT. Stripped of the thrills of illegal racing, this is one Need for Speed you certainly don't need.

Sasha Muller

SUMMARY

- ✓ Damage modelling
- ✗ Average graphics
- ✗ No sense of fun

DRIVING GAME Requires Windows XP/Vista, 2.8GHz processor, 512MB RAM, 128MB graphics card, 8GB disk space
PRODUCT CODE B000RO7BZG
DETAILS www.ea.com/prostreet